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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 000033

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SUBJECT: STUDENT MOVEMENT FOCUSING ON 2008 LOCAL ELECTIONS

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT DOWNES,
REASON 1.4 (D)

11. (C) Summary. Prominent Venezuelan student leader Yon Goicochea told Emboffs January 8 that the opposition student movement plans to focus on state and municipal elections that will be held by November 2008. The student movement intends to press opposition parties to name consensus candidates in local races. Several prominent university students also plan to run for mayoral or city council seats (but not Goicochea). Goicochea said university students would also engage in campaigns to generate greater public debate over pressing national problems, such as crime. He anticipates that the Venezuelan government will continue to cut funding to autonomous universities and try to build up Bolivarian student councils, but delay any legislative attack on university autonomy until after the state and municipal elections. It remains to be seen whether the student leaders can retain their "star power" and credibility while engaging more directly in Venezuelan politics.
End Summary.

State and Local Elections

12. (C) Yon Goicochea, one of the three leading elected university movement coordinators, met with Emboffs January 8 (on the margins of applying for a visa). The student leader said the university student movement is focusing on state and local elections to be held by early November in 2008. Goicochea said two key lessons of the "No" camp's victory in the December 2007 referendum are the need to maintain opposition unity and to present "fresh faces" to voters. He fears that long-standing traditional opposition figures will insist on running for state and local offices, crowding out new and more viable opposition candidates.

13. (C) Goicochea said the student movement is trying to persuade opposition parties to back consensus opposition candidates. He suggested university students would be prepared to launch protests against opposition leaders who stand in the way of opposition unity. Goicochea said opposition parties are already negotiating over consensus candidacies and suggested that in many cases, the choice would be obvious. He said opposition parties and students would be influenced by pre-election polling and do not intend to hold primaries, which he said would be too divisive.

14. (C) Goicochea also confirmed widespread rumors that student leader Stalin Gonzalez intends to run for the mayoral seat in the Libertador Borough of central Caracas. He added that several other unspecified student leaders intended to run for mayoral or municipal council seats, if they can get the support of opposition parties. Noting that he is only 23, Goicochea said he does not intend to run for local office in 2008, but is interested in running for the National Assembly in 2010.

Other Student Priorities

15. (C) University students also intend to focus public attention on national problems, such as crime and food shortages, according to Goicochea. He said students would try to steer public debate away from the traditional political "for-or-against-Chavez" fault line. Much in the same way they raised substantive concerns about Chavez' proposals for constitutional changes in 2007, Goicochea said students would publicize facts associated with pressing national problems. He also said students would undertake additional community outreach efforts to create stronger ties with poorer Venezuelans, but he did not specify how.

16. (C) Asked about government encroachments on university autonomy, Goicochea said he expects the Venezuelan government to continue to cut funding for autonomous universities and to try to build up parallel Bolivarian student councils to compete with existing, elected student bodies. He said he is urging students to participate in government-sanctioned student councils rather than cede the field to pro-Chavez students on university campuses. He does not expect Chavez to try this year to push through a university law that would effectively eliminate university autonomy this year because such controversial legislation would hurt pro-Chavez

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candidates in state and local elections. Goicochea said at the same time autonomous universities need to "modernize" their admission standards and become more inclusive.

Comment

17. (C) University students played a pivotal role in the defeat of Chavez' proposed changes to the constitution in the December 2007 referendum. By the end of the "No" campaign, they coordinated closely with opposition political parties, organizing joint marches and serving as election monitors. The student movement's credibility, however, was in large part staked on the public perception that it was unaffiliated with traditional opposition parties (even though many student leaders are active in opposition party youth wings). Student leaders may want the student movement to assume a more open and important role in Venezuelan politics, but it remains to be seen whether opposition parties can successfully incorporate the student movement. It is also an open question whether the student movement can still maintain its high level of public credibility while participating directly in state and local elections.

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